
Trump and the CIA

Borrowing From Nixon's Playbook

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CARLOS BARRIA / REUTERS

U.S. President Donald Trump delivers remarks during a visit to the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia, January 21, 2017.

Former U.S. President Richard Nixon did not mince his words when it came to the Central Intelligence Agency. He called it “disloyal,” “unproductive,” “over-staffed,” “not worth a damn,” and even asked, “What the hell do those clowns do out there in Langley?” The country’s combative new Commander-in-Chief Donald Trump has had similar words for the agency, branding U.S. intelligence officers as “disgraceful,” “politically motivated,” and “sick people” who spread fake news. Although commentators have been quick to point out

key similarities between Trump and Nixon—for example, their ability to nurse a grudge, their obsession with conspiracies, their hatred of the press, their professed “outsider” status, and their willingness to fight for the ignored and forgotten “great silent majority”—few have yet probed the remarkable parallels in their relationship with America’s premier spy agency.

AT WAR WITH THE CIA

It is clear that Trump regards the CIA as a political enemy determined to undermine his credibility in the eyes of the American people. In his defense, during the election campaign, many senior intelligence officials publicly threw their weight behind his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, and have since launched investigations into possible Russian ties to his campaign, his advisers, and his business interests. Former acting CIA Director Michael Morell even went on record to say that “[Russian President Vladimir] Putin had recruited Trump as an unwitting agent of the Russian Federation.” Throughout the presidential transition, and during the early days of his administration, Trump consistently attacked the CIA for sounding the alarm on Russian interference in the November election. Interestingly, Morell has now walked back his earlier suggestion of there being collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russians, with NBC News quoting him as saying, “There is smoke, but there is no fire—at all.”

Trump’s surrogates, meanwhile, such as White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, speak openly about embittered Obama holdovers at the CIA waging a rear-guard attack against the new president. When an unverified “dossier” linked to a former British intelligence officer surfaced in the media on the eve of Trump’s inauguration—replete with racy allegations about his business dealings, personal peccadilloes, and connections to Moscow—he accused the CIA of

manufacturing and leaking it to undercut his nascent presidency, comparing its agents to Nazi propagandists. But at least one of the claims in the dossier has proven to be true, namely that [Mikhail Kalugin](#), head of the economics section at the Russian embassy, was in fact a spy and that sometime in August 2016, as the accusations over electoral meddling heated up, Moscow pulled him from his post.

All of this echoes Nixon. Operating in a world where all politics was personal, he held the CIA at least partly responsible for his narrow election defeat by John F. Kennedy in 1960, believing that scheming “Langley liberals” had deliberately failed to debunk Kennedy’s false claim that the United States trailed the Soviet Union in intercontinental ballistic missiles (the so-called missile gap). One former director, Admiral Stansfield Turner, recalled that Nixon saw the CIA as “part of the Ivy League liberal conspiracy.” Nixon held a grudge against the East Coast establishment types who dominated the organs of the Cold War national security state, especially the upper ranks of the CIA. As the son of a small-town grocer, Nixon stayed close to his family and attended a local college, turning down a scholarship to Harvard owing to lack of funds.

Early evidence suggests that Trump is highly skeptical of the CIA’s competence. On the campaign trail, he routinely mocked the CIA over its historic, flawed intelligence assessment of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction in 2002. In December 2016, when the CIA told Congress that Russia, in its view, had hacked the emails of the Democratic National Committee with the objective of getting Trump into the White House, Trump and his transition team dismissed the claims and implied that Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, had better intelligence than the agency.

Perhaps the clearest indication of just how little Trump values the CIA’s work was when, in a televised interview, he

questioned the usefulness of receiving the President's Daily Brief, suggesting that three times a week was sufficient for a "smart guy" like himself and that "his generals," vice president, and national security adviser would alert him if something required his attention. Although the daily brief is now an all-community product, CIA analysts remain primary contributors and CIA officers make enormous sacrifices to get intelligence to the president, in some cases paying with their lives. Trump's remarks were deeply offensive and a clear sign that he did not trust the CIA.

Again, all of this bears a striking resemblance to Nixon. Together with his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, Nixon had a poor opinion of the CIA's assessments, believing that estimators were not on his political "wavelength" and too often "hedged their bets" to avoid being scapegoated if they were wrong. As Kissinger recollected in his 1979 memoir, the CIA, far from "being the hawkish band of international adventurers so facilely portrayed by its critics, usually erred on the side of the interpretation fashionable in the Washington establishment." Throughout his presidency, Nixon regularly complained that CIA support was "sorely lacking" at critical moments. For example, when the agency failed to warn him that the Cambodian head of state had been deposed in a coup in 1970, he gave White House Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman an ear-bashing: "Get rid of the clowns. What use are they? They've got 40,000 people over there reading newspapers." To underscore his displeasure, he returned to the CIA a thick package of unopened daily briefs. As with Trump, there is evidence that Nixon eventually blew off his daily intelligence briefings altogether. When Andrew Marshall, the resident National Security Council (NSC) adviser on intelligence matters, reviewed the daily briefs sent to Nixon during his first six months in office, he noticed that the president's handwritten notes in the margins became fewer and fewer until they disappeared completely.

OUT OF THE LOOP

By recognizing the similarities between Trump and Nixon in their outlook toward the CIA, it is possible to make some forecasts about how his relationship with the agency might evolve over the next few years.

The Nixon comparison suggests that Trump will rely more on intelligence from key White House and NSC staff members, material from the Pentagon that has been “stovepiped” (meaning not widely shared due to inter-agency rivalries), or even papers from like-minded external think tanks, rather than traditional rounded assessments on major foreign policy issues. The growth of open source intelligence makes this all the more likely. Supported by his own team of analysts, Kissinger, not the Director of Central Intelligence, was Nixon’s main intelligence adviser, producing his personal equivalent of the President’s Daily Brief. To reach the president, the CIA had to go through Kissinger, who selected what intelligence from Langley made its way onto his desk. Remarkably, Nixon tried to exclude Richard Helms, the first of three CIA directors who served under him, from attending NSC meetings; when told that this was impractical, he attempted, again to no avail, to simply have Helms brief the council at the start of the meeting and then leave.

On a host of important issues, from Strategic Arms Limitation Talks to the bombing of Laos and Cambodia, the CIA, like the State Department and the Pentagon, routinely found itself cut out of core decision making, as Nixon and Kissinger drew upon secret backchannels with foreign statesmen, such as with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, as a way of doing business. Amazingly, Nixon and Kissinger decided not to tell the CIA about their plans to seek a rapprochement with Communist China, deliberately leaving its analysts in the dark about one of the most important developments for decades. “How can we do our job if we don’t know what’s going on?”

wrote an exasperated CIA Director William Colby in his 1978 memoir *Honorable Men*. Years later, Kissinger acknowledged that bypassing the CIA was “demoralizing” for the agency and he found it “unlikely to be recommended in textbooks on public administration.”

There are early signs that Trump will go down much the same road and sideline the traditional intelligence machinery. One of them was initially giving Steve Bannon, the president’s chief strategist, a full seat on the powerful “principals committee” of the NSC, the senior inter-agency forum for discussing national security, while downgrading the roles of both the director of national intelligence (DNI) and the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, with their attendance at meetings only required when discussions relate to their “direct responsibilities and expertise.” Conspicuously, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, although a pugnacious Kansas congressman and Tea Party supporter, was omitted altogether from the committee.

The brief elevation of Bannon, a consigliere who traffics tinfoil hat theories about globalization, immigration, and shadow government, to a status on the NSC alongside the secretaries of state and defense and above the country’s top intelligence and military professionals, shocked officials on both sides of the aisle, as well as leading figures from the intelligence community. In a tweet, President Barack Obama’s National Security Adviser Susan Rice described the move as “stone cold crazy,” before adding: “Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and DNI treated as afterthoughts in Cabinet-level principals meetings. And where is CIA?? Cut out of everything.” Although Pompeo was later reinstated as a regular member of the committee, following an outcry, and Bannon removed, the episode demonstrates that in a Trump administration, spy chiefs are considered a luxury, not a necessity.

Yet Bannon remains influential. In March, National Security Adviser Lieutenant Gen H.R McMaster tried to remove 30-year-old Ezra Cohen-Watnick as the NSC's senior director for intelligence programs, but the young aide appealed to Bannon and Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner. Cohen-Watnick, who has only completed a single junior-level tour of duty with the Defense Intelligence Agency in Afghanistan, now occupies an intelligence post equivalent to that of a three-star general. The role is normally performed by a senior CIA official and insiders suggest that Cohen-Watnick's mission is to reduce the power of the CIA while elevating Pentagon special ops. Given that Pompeo and CIA briefers were not in the Mar-a-Lago situation room when the decision was taken to launch a cruise missile attack on Syria, he may be judged to have been successful so far.

Trump's preference, like Nixon, for running critical foreign policy decisions out of the Oval Office is further evidenced by the creation of the so-called Strategic Initiatives Group. In late-January, the press reported that Bannon had teamed up with Kushner to set up an internal think-tank within the White House to consider long-term strategic issues such as counterterrorism and relations with Russia and NATO. Comprising, among others, a Goldman Sachs executive, a real estate mogul, and a Breitbart journalist, the body has quickly earned a reputation as an "alternative lodestar of power and influence," muscling in on turf traditionally occupied by the State Department and CIA. Using think tanks rather than strategic intelligence to drive future strategy is not unknown, but it is more common in countries like China than the West.



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Former U.S. President Richard M. Nixon gives his farewell speech to members of his cabinet and staff in the East Room of the White House, following his resignation, August 9, 1974.

INTELLIGENCE REFORM AND POLITICIZATION

There is a strong possibility that Trump will look to investigate and reform the intelligence community generally—and the CIA in particular. In December 1970, concerned about the agency's loyalty and competence, Nixon ordered a root-and-branch review of the intelligence community, assigning the task to James Schlesinger, an intelligence neophyte but respected rising star in the Office of Management and Budget. Reporting the following spring, Schlesinger argued that the president did not get good value for money from the CIA, partly because it had failed to embrace new collection technologies and partly because it clung obsessively to its "OSS ancestry," (the Office of Strategic Services was the agency's predecessor) recruiting from a narrow elite social base and employing too many cowboys and not enough thinkers. With the intention of modernizing the CIA, but also making the agency more of a loyal presidential instrument, Nixon ordered Helms to make changes and sent over Vernon Walters, deputy director of the CIA, to keep an eye on him. When Helms dragged his feet, Nixon fired him and installed Schlesinger.

On arrival, Schlesinger's first words to the CIA were, "I'm here to make sure you don't screw Richard Nixon." Resented at Langley for being a brash interloper and political fixer, he started a process that led to the abolition of the CIA's prized Office of National Estimates and fired or forced into early retirement nearly seven percent of the workforce. Nixon had initially wanted a 40 percent cut, explaining to a young Donald Rumsfeld, then counselor to the president, that the "government needs an enema." Lasting only seventeen weeks before moving on to be secretary of defense, Schlesinger is still remembered as the most unpopular CIA director in history.

Just like Nixon, Trump has plans to reform, streamline, and even downsize the intelligence community. But unlike Nixon, his instrument is likely to be different as the community is

now led by a director of national intelligence—a post created in late-2004 in response to verdicts from the 9/11 Commission about a lack of cooperation between the CIA, FBI, and other agencies. Last month, the Senate confirmed Daniel Coats, a former member of the intelligence oversight committee and ambassador to Germany, as the new DNI. Coats, a Tea Party sympathizer, is widely liked on both sides of the House and considered to be a conciliator. Like Pompeo, he has firm views on Moscow and is regarded as a Russia hawk. Placing two like-minded politicians in the roles of Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) and DNI was an essential and deft move, quite simply because the DNI's office is too weak and lacks the budgetary power to undertake serious community reform alone. With the confirmation of Coats, significant change now seems likely.

Among those who hold that the CIA should try to operate above politics and ensure that intelligence is objective, evidence-based, and scientific, the great fear is that Trump, much like Nixon before him, will use reform to politicize intelligence reporting. Trump has already laid such foundations. In his first visit to the CIA, standing in front of the hallowed Memorial Wall, a solemn constellation of chiseled stars to commemorate the agency's fallen heroes, Trump used the occasion to deliver a highly political speech, bragging that his inauguration crowd the day before was greater than the "biased media" had acknowledged, and speculating that "almost everybody" in the room had voted for him "because we're all on the same wavelength, folks." The implication was, get with the program, or get out.

Perhaps the most alarming danger that looms ahead is politicized covert action. History shows us that some of the most bizarre CIA activities of the last century emanated not from Langley but from the West Wing. Both Nixon and Kissinger saw covert action not just as a tool to advance policy but as a means to settle personal scores. In 1971,

Nixon overturned the government in Bolivia, a country where as Eisenhower's Vice President in the 1950s he had been pelted with rocks by a leftist mob. Trump, who is not known for having a moderate temperament, could use the CIA to launch ad hominem operations. That is a terrifying prospect, given that post-9/11, the CIA is a more action-oriented agency, having become what Panetta called a "combatant command" in the fight against terrorism. The CIA, and indeed U.S. Cyber Command, have developed frightening capabilities in the realm of electronic covert action, of the kind used against Iran's nuclear program in recent years. Trump's closeness to Israel, an enthusiastic advocate of aggressive cyber operations, makes this more likely.

SPOOKING THE DONALD

Describing the president's remarks about the CIA as a "gut-punch," Morell has predicted a "wave of resignations," rather similar to those that followed the arrival of former CIA Director Porter Goss in 2004 and his decision to polygraph senior figures in a search for anti-White House leakers. As he sees it, intelligence officers are a tight tribe who would rather vote with their feet than endure another Iraq WMD scenario. This has not occurred and only one analyst, Edward Price, has resigned, claiming that the composition of the NSC was evidence that intelligence officers will be forced to accept the "America First" narrative.

Instead, the Nixon comparison suggests there will not be a mass flight from intelligence jobs. Faced with a similarly hostile figure in the White House, CIA employees did not voluntarily leave in droves and chose instead to fight back. Befitting the dark art of espionage, they eschewed open mutiny or direct confrontation in favor of what anthropologist James C. Scott has termed "everyday resistance" or "infrapolitics," a cumulative campaign of covert, disguised acts of rebellion, which over time amounted to a form of

guerilla warfare against the president.

The clearest act of resistance was in the realm of geopolitical alliances. In 1973, annoyed by the pro-Gaullist policies of British Prime Minister Edward Heath, Nixon and Kissinger agreed to terminate the flow of intelligence to London, its closest partner in the world of secret service, as a punishment. Kissinger remarked, "I'm cutting them off from intelligence special information . . . we can't trust them." In some areas, such as imagery, this was fully implemented, but other agencies such as CIA and the National Security Agency (NSA) dug their heels in, citing liaison agreements between the two countries that they believed had legal standing. Nixon was unaware that some of the bigger intelligence programs were transnational enterprises—and this is even more true now. One can only imagine how the NSA and its British equivalent, GCHQ, received the recent accusation that British signals intelligence bugged Trump Tower on behalf of Obama. Apparently, American officials in London encouraged GCHQ to issue an almost unprecedented public denial. GCHQ rarely comments publicly, but it did deny bugging Princess Diana at the inquest into her death in 2008.

The Nixon period gives us some clues as to how resistance works. Among the undercover rank and file, activism ranged from scribbling unflattering caricatures of the president on noticeboards, to defacing his and Schlesinger's official portraits. Indeed, to stop the vandalism, the DCI's staff had CCTV cameras installed opposite the portraits at Langley. The CIA rank and file also deliberately turned up late for work, knowing that Schlesinger, an avid birdwatcher in his spare time, would grow irate at the sight of his straggling employees as he monitored the staff car park through binoculars from his office window. Among the CIA's senior managers, resistance included "slow-walking" the president's directives to withholding information.

Leaks were the biggest problem. The most significant one came from Deputy Director of the FBI Mark Felt, who, until he reached his nineties and revealed himself as Bob Woodward's source for some of the early Watergate revelations, was known to the public only as "Deep Throat." Less famously, in an astounding case of espionage against their civilian commander-in-chief, the Joint Chiefs of Staff grew so frustrated with Nixon that they planted a spy on the staff of the NSC. At the order of the Chairman, Admiral Thomas Moorer, Yeoman Charles Radford, a young Navy stenographer, forwarded to them thousands of photocopied Top Secret papers, pilfered from burn bags, interoffice envelopes, and even the briefcases of Kissinger and his then-deputy, Brigadier General Alexander Haig. As revealed by the White House tapes, when Nixon discovered the subterfuge he pounded his desk in anger.

Trump, it appears, has awakened similar forces of resistance. In the words of Senate Minority leader Chuck Schumer, "You take on the intelligence community and they have six ways from Sunday of getting back at you." In a show of defiance, the CIA denied security clearance to Rob Townley, a top deputy to National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, thereby preventing him from heading up the NSC's Africa desk. Amid concerns that sensitive data might find its way to Moscow, there have been widespread reports of secret information being withheld from the president and his associates. In the Washington Post, a senior NSA official explained that the agency was systematically holding back the "good stuff," although adding that it was pointless, in light of Trump's comments about the President's Daily Brief, to share it anyway. Elsewhere, a senior Pentagon intelligence official told the New York Observer newspaper that there was now a "chill" in the information flow, stating that "since January 20, we've assumed that the Kremlin has ears inside the SITROOM," the 5,525 square foot intelligence management

center in the basement of the West Wing. The report was notably delicious, since Kushner is the Observer's owner and publisher. For its part, the CIA has flatly denied hiding intelligence from the president, with Pompeo stating that this "does not, has not, and will never [happen], period."

WAR ON THE LEAKERS

No president likes leakers and Obama prosecuted more of them in the security realm than all previous presidents combined. Perhaps Trump will exceed that record. Since winning the election on November 8, the president has been buffeted by a barrage of unauthorized disclosures of classified and confidential information, often targeting him personally, from details of his telephone calls with foreign heads of state, to drafts of his executive orders on immigration. Just 24 days after the inauguration, the wave of disclosure claimed its first casualty in Flynn, who was forced to resign when leaked details of his private telephone conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, on the day Obama expelled 35 Russian diplomats in retaliation for alleged election hacking, were printed by Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, famous for his CIA sources. For disgruntled intelligence officers, especially those of a liberal hue, the ousting of Flynn represented a significant symbolic victory.

How Trump responds to leaks may well define his presidency. Since 9/11, to combat the threat of international terrorism, the national security state has ballooned in size and moved from a culture of "need to know" to "need to share." As a result, some 5.1 million Americans have security clearances: that is more than the population of Norway. In this environment, there will doubtless be some who will take unilateral action against a president they dislike. For Nixon, leaks were all consuming; they added to his sense of victimhood and engulfed him in a state of perpetual suspicion and enmity where opponents, even friends, were confused

with enemies. To combat leaks, he turned to warrantless wiretaps and “black-bag jobs,” even using them against figures such as NSC staffer Anthony Lake, who disapproved of the invasion of Cambodia and was believed to be talking to the press, with disastrous consequences. Lake later sued Kissinger, who had authorized the wiretaps against him, and eventually won a letter of apology. Famously, of course, Nixon created the “Plumbers,” an in-house political investigative unit that got caught red-handed by local cops at the Watergate offices of the Democratic National headquarters, setting off a sequence of events that would ultimately lead to his resignation.

Yet Trump evidently admires Nixon. Indeed, among the personal effects he displays in the Oval Office is a framed letter from Nixon prophesying that, if the businessman ever run for office, he would be a “winner.” As Trump deals with leaks, he would be wise to heed the lessons of the disgraced 37th president.

At a time of turbulence in international affairs, Trump and the CIA should be close allies. Increasingly, intelligence and special operations are the silver bullet that presidents turn to at times of difficulty. As long as Trump does not visit the headquarters too often to make political speeches, there is scope for convergence around a tougher line on terrorism. Trump has granted the CIA authority to conduct lethal drone strikes once again and, according to one news report, is rolling back the limits Obama imposed on the spy agency’s paramilitary operations. Hardliners at Langley are cheered by the appointment of the uncompromising Gina Haspel, who supported the agency’s George W. Bush-era “extraordinary rendition” program, as Pompeo’s new deputy.

Moreover, even some of the agency’s most thoughtful veterans, such as former Deputy Director of Intelligence Carmen Medina, think that U.S. intelligence needs a shake-up

after over a decade of rapid growth and intense immersion in a long grueling war of counterinsurgency. Again, there are parallels with the Nixon and the Vietnam period. While the memoirs of senior CIA managers like Helms and Colby recall Schlesinger with unqualified loathing, this was not true of the lower orders. Looking back at his time as a junior analyst on the Russia desk in the early 1970s, Bob Gates noted intriguingly that the CIA actually needed some housecleaning. It was more Schlesinger's "rude, demanding, arrogant" manner that caused the upset. Gates concedes that among the rank and file there was "some sympathy" for Schlesinger's attempt to break the power of the complacent Ivy League set and "to restore energy, zest, and relevance to the CIA."

In reality, a happy outcome between Trump and the CIA is unlikely. By continuing to bully, disparage, and outflank the agency like he would contestants on a reality TV show, the rift will widen and resistance will increase. What a president needs is a CIA director who is neutral about policy and will tell him the facts fearlessly, and what the CIA needs is a president who will listen. Neither of these things seem to be in place. As with Nixon, Trump's paranoia will undermine personal effectiveness. The strongest parallel between the two men is their inability to command wide loyalty and affection across Washington, focusing instead on a small inner circle of confidants. Riding a populist wave, he campaigned on the battle cry of "drain the swamp," meaning Washington, D.C.'s stinking wetland of moneyed interests, mainstream media, and entrenched bureaucracies. On his present course, as political commentator Gabriel Schoenfeld has put it, the swamp is more likely to drain him, as it did Nixon on August 8, 1974. He cannot say he hasn't been warned.

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